

HEALTH PROBLEM FROM WORKING AS THAI TRADITIONAL MASSAGE THERAPISTS IN THAILAND

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ABSTRACT: A cross-sectional analytical study in Thai traditional massage therapists in public hospitals in Thailand was conducted, to determine health problems of Thai traditional massage therapists (TTMs) who work at Thai traditional medicine units in public hospitals in Thailand, from March to July 2012. The therapists completed a six pages questionnaire. About 60% of Thai traditional massage therapists practised both Common and Court-type Thai massage. The highest symptom of pain was lower back pain (82.2%) followed by upper back (80.2%) and neck (78.0%). The majority used incorrect posture which was the main cause from working while giving massage to the clients (76.1%). The posture mostly used kneeling on heels (75.9%) and the parts of the body mostly used were thumbs and knuckles (71.4%). This study showed the types of massage related to left shoulder pain ($p=0.00$) and the duration of working related to lower back pain ($p=0.04$). In conclusion, body mass index, period of working, types of massage, long working hours, and incorrect postures affected the therapists.

Keywords: Thai traditional massage therapists, Common Thai massage, Court-type Thai massage, health problem, musculoskeletal disorders

INTRODUCTION

Therapeutic massage history dated back to the era before Christ. The evidence is the old Chinese book (3000 year B.C.) about the massage called “Cong-Fu of the Toa-Tse” [1]. In Thailand, therapeutic massage had long been practised as recorded in the stone inscription in the reign of King Ramkhamhaeng. In 2007, the Department of Development of Thai Traditional and Alternative Medicine, Ministry of Public Health organized a survey to estimate a number of Thai traditional massage therapists throughout Thailand and reported about 2,630 therapists being active massage therapists [2, 3]. Massage is an instance of rubbing and pressing the body with hands or other part of the body to relieve or prevent tension or pain. It can affect the health of Thai Traditional Massage Therapists (TTMs) due to their inexperience and lack of massaging knowledge. However, these are not solely the causes that make therapists having health problems. Personal problems of the therapists i.e. their age or congenital disease, work condition and environment, work shift, massage duration, massage bed can be the cause that makes the therapists having health problems. Their

health problems are back, waist, finger, arm, and body pains. The symptoms are often found in the practice related to muscles and bones, especially those who performed the work as massage therapist. The occupation of TTMs needs to use many parts of the body, postures and gestures as well as force or weight in massaging in order to relieve the pain in each part of the patient’s body [4, 5].

A survey of Musculoskeletal Symptoms and Injuries among Experienced Massage and Body Work Professionals Survey Result by Greene and Goggins [4] (Originally published in *Massage & Bodywork* magazine, December/January 2006.) among 601 therapists found that 65% reporting pain during or following massage work within the past 2 years. The most common locations for symptoms of pain were thumbs (30 %), wrists (27 %), shoulders (26 %), and lower back (25%). The most common location for symptoms of discomfort and soreness was lower back (25 %), followed by shoulders (24 %), thumbs (23 %), neck (21%), and hands (21%). Many respondents reported pain or discomfort in more than one part of the body in the past two years. A book of the Royal Thai massage at Ayurved Thamrong School, indicates: “If a massage therapist is in wrong posture or exerts the force in the wrong direction, as well as raises the head up and down too much, after finishing

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massaging, the therapist may suffer from pains in the olden day called “Roke Khao Tua Mor” or “Latrogenic disease”. This is a disease due to improper treatment [6-8]. According to aforementioned document, a study concerning work related health problem among TTMs should be conducted as there is no research concerning health problem of Thai traditional massage therapists. The purpose of this study was to determine the health problems in Thai traditional massage therapists (TTMs) who work at Thai traditional medicine units in public hospitals in Thailand.

METHOD

A descriptive design was used in this study. All questionnaires were analyzed by using SPSS version 17.0. The mean, standard deviation and range were calculated for age, years of experience, body mass index (BMI), and hours of working. Chi-square test was applied to data analysis. Statistical significance was $p < 0.05$.

INSTRUMENTATION

The survey instrument was a self-administered 6 page questionnaire composed of 4 parts. Part one: collecting socio-demographic characteristics; part two: collecting physical health record of TTMs; part three: asking about the working characteristics of therapists and part four: collecting health problems from working

PROCEDURES

Approval of the Ethics Review Committee for Research Involving Human Research Subjects, Health Science Group, Chulalongkorn University was obtained before the commencement of the study. The data were collected by using the self-administered questionnaire. One thousand four hundred and twenty six copies of the questionnaire were mailed to TTMs to be filled out and returned to the College of Public Health Sciences, Chulalongkorn University from March to July 2012. Nine hundred and eighty two copies were returned and 444 copies were completed (31.1% from all copies).

RESULTS

The majority of the TTMs (85.4%) was female, 14.6% was male. The average age of therapists was 40.65 years (40.65±9.55). Most therapists were in the age range of 45-49 years (20.9%) followed by 35-39 years (18.5%) and 40-44 years (18.5%). More than 90% of the therapist has never smoked and 70.3% has never drunk alcohol. The majority of the Thai traditional massage therapists' practised

both Common Thai massage and Court-type Thai massage (60.8%). Numerous factors resulting from working affected TTMs' health during the study. The research reported that 95.9% of TTMs used only their fingers and wrists to make the hard exertion for massaging, followed by massage services to women (95%), and massage service to men (94.4%).

The posture of Thai massage had affected their health (75%). At work, most therapists (72.1%) changed their massage posture or client's posture and 60% changed the part of the body while giving massage to the client when they had a pain in some parts of the body such as hands, fingers, joints, elbows and feet. Most therapists (77.7%) were at risk from musculoskeletal symptoms such as back, finger and elbow pains resulting from working.

The majority of the therapists reported the cause of pains, signs, and symptoms of injuries was incorrect massage postures (69.6%) and other jobs (12.2 %). Most therapists sometimes had lower back pain (66.9%) followed by upper back (62.7%) and neck (62.4%). The parts of the body which were most often associated with these pains were the right hand pain (24.5%), the left hand pain (23%), and the right shoulder (18.9%) respectively. About 68% of the therapists sometimes had these symptoms that affected their work. When they had the symptoms, pain or injuries, they mostly took care of themselves by asking their peers to heal them (72.1%). The majority of TTMs used incorrect posture while giving Thai traditional massage to their clients (76.1%) and 63.1% of the therapists picked up or lifted up things in an incorrect position.

From the result, age did not relate to pain at some parts of the therapists' body and there was no statistical significance ($p > 0.05$). Also, male and female did not show a relationship of statistical significance. TTMs massaged more than 5 years, the duration of working did not relate to the symptoms of pains at some parts of the therapists' body and there was no statistical significance except lower back pain ($p = 0.04$). The types of the massage related to the symptoms of pains: at left shoulder ($p = 0.00$) followed by the right shoulder ($p = 0.01$), the left elbow ($p = 0.01$) and the left knee ($p = 0.04$). The overall environment of the workplace for massage related to the therapists' pains at right shoulder ($p = 0.04$) in the last six months. TTMs working other jobs related to pains at the left elbow ($p = 0.04$) and the right elbow ($p = 0.01$). The body mass index related to left knee ($p = 0.03$), ankles, and right foot pain ($p = 0.05$), and this was statistical significance (Table 1).

Table 1 Relationship between pain at some parts of therapists' body and other factors related to their work

Percentage of reporting pain at some parts of therapists' body	Number of years that therapists working		Type of massage			Environment		Body mass Index			Other jobs		
	≤5 yrs (N=237)	>5 yrs (N=206)	Common Thai (N=44)	Court-type Thai (N=130)	Both Types (N=270)	Un-comfortable (N=58)	comfortable (N=384)	Under weight (N=26)	Normal (N=229)	Marginally overweight (N=143)	Overweight (N=36)	massage only (n=350)	Therapists did other jobs (n=94)
Lower back	85.7*	78.2*	86.4	82.3	81.5	77.6	83.1	84.6	79.9	86.0	77.8	82.6	80.9
Left shoulder	55.7	55.8	79.2**	57.7**	50.7**	56.9	55.7	76.9	53.7	53.1	61.1	53.7	62.8
Right shoulder	75.9	73.8	88.6**	80.0**	70.4**	86.2**	73.4**	73.1	75.1	74.1	77.8	74.9	75.5
Left elbow	52.7	51.9	72.7**	46.9**	51.5**	51.7	52.6	57.7	52.8	51.0	44.4	49.7*	61.7*
Right elbow	54.9	51.9	63.6	50.8	53.0	56.9	53.1	53.8	53.7	53.1	47.2	50.3**	64.4**
Left knee	64.6	63.6	77.3*	67.7*	62.2*	65.5	64.1	61.6*	64.2*	58.7*	86.1*	64.3	66.0
Ankle/right foot	51.5	44.7	56.8	52.3	45.2	44.8	46.0	57.7*	46.7*	44.1*	63.9*	49.1	45.7

DISCUSSION

This study found that most of the TTMs have symptoms at lower back (82.2%) during the last six months followed by the upper back (80.2%) and neck (78%). It indicated that TTMs have the risk, symptoms of musculoskeletal system and bone structure, at the lower back, when compared with the past. Cromie et al., [9], Glover [10], Bork et al., [11] found that there is a difference in the job description, duration of working, and work characteristic. Ozguler et al. [12] studied the strength of muscle and bone. It was found that the body mass index was not associated with the symptoms of musculoskeletal disorders at the lower back. This is consistent with the study of Smedley et al. [13]. Regarding duration of working with the symptoms of pains at some parts of therapist's body in the last six months, they were correlated with the incidence of the skeletal system, muscles and bone at the lower back ($p=0.04$), which is consistent with the study of Greene and Goggins [4]. Hours of massaging and the symptoms of pains at some parts of the therapist's body in the last six months were not associated with musculoskeletal disorders which was in accordance with the study of Greene and Goggins [4]. From our study, the types of massage (Common Thai massage, Court-type Thai massage and both Common Thai and Court-type Thai massage) were statistically significant and related to the symptom of pains at left shoulder ($p=0.01$), right shoulder ($p=0.01$), left elbow ($p=0.01$) and left knee ($p=0.04$) in the last six month. Our research was in accordance with Greene and Goggins [4]. The types of massage affected the injury or the health problem. The working activity factors that affected the part of TTMs' body also related to the study of Greene and Goggins [4]. Eighty percent of the respondents had symptoms of pains or illness especially health problems due to their massage practice.

CONCLUSION

The health problems from working of TTMs in Thailand were musculoskeletal disorders. The causes of pains, signs, and symptoms of injuries were incorrect massage postures as well as other factors.

LIMITATION

This research studied the TTMs' health problems only at Thai traditional units in the general hospitals therefore the result might not be applicable to other massage therapists in other massage services.

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